The Setting and Planning Background

Chugach National Forest

UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE-FOREST SERVICE

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The 5.5-million acre Chugach National Forest in Southcentral Alaska forms a great arc around Prince William Sound on the Gulf of Alaska. The Forest stretches more than 200 miles from southeast of Cordova to the eastern Kenai. Diverse landscapes of the Forest include high altitude icefields, rugged mountain peaks, tidewater glaciers, and extensive wetlands.

The Chugach National Forest was created by presidential proclamation in 1892 as the Afognak Forest and Fish Culture Reserve. For more than a century, the Forest has provided outstanding fish and wildlife habitat and, more recently, world-class recreation and tourism opportunities. Fish, wildlife, and recreation/tourism continue to be the major resources and uses of the Forest and represent its greatest potential for future management.

The Chugach National Forest is the second largest in the National Forest System and has three distinct geographic areas: the Kenai Peninsula, Prince William Sound, and the Copper River Delta.

- The Kenai Peninsula. The Kenai Peninsula portion of the Chugach National Forest encompasses 1,172,750 acres (21 percent of the Forest). Its forested lands, mountains, and rivers are the most accessible of the three areas. The Kenai also has the most recreational activity, wood harvesting, and mineral activity.

- Prince William Sound. Prince William Sound encompasses 2,625,140 acres (48 percent of the Forest). It is an area of forested islands, intricate coastlines, and tidewater glaciers, with portions still recovering from the *Exxon Valdez* Oil Spill of 1989. Lands in the western portion were designated as the Nellie Juan-College Fiord Wilderness Study Area in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980.

- The Copper River Delta. The Copper River Delta encompasses 1,693,690 acres (31 percent of the Forest). The Delta is renowned for its vast wetland habitats, mountains, and glaciers. Congress established the primary management direction for the Delta as the conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats (Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980).

The Chugach National Forest is just 50 miles south of Anchorage, where half of Alaska's population lives. The communities of Whittier and Valdez serve as gateways to Prince William Sound on the west and east sides, respectively. These towns depend on tourism, marine recreation, and commercial fishing in Prince William Sound. Forest Service ranger district offices are in Girdwood, Cordova, and Seward. Tourism and recreation play key roles in the economies of these communities. Seward and Cordova economies are also dependent on the rich commercial and sport fishing resources of the surrounding waters. Cordova's Copper River kings and reds are acclaimed as some of the finest salmon commercially available. Cordova is accessible only by plane or boat.

The first Chugach Forest Plan under the National Forest Management Act was completed in 1984. Revision of this plan was launched in 1997 with publication of a Notice of Intent in the Federal Register. More than 3,000 comments were received during this initial scoping.

An innovative public participation approach was used throughout the planning process. This collaborative learning approach included opening meetings of the Forest Service's interdisciplinary team and forest leadership team to the public; using the internet to share and distribute information; and conducting collaborative learning training and workshops in communities.

The draft Environmental Impact Statement and Forest plan were released in September 2000 for public review and comment. During the revision effort, over 33,000 written comments were received and analyzed. Regional Forester Denny Bschor will sign the Record of Decision within the next week. The final Environmental Impact Statement and Forest Plan will be available about mid-June.